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ABSTRACT

A workshop program, designed as a noncredit adjunct to composition classes, was developed in order to serve the individual needs of college students. Close communication between regular course instructors and workshop staff was maintained, and the attempt was made to substitute a developmental philosophy of learning for the usual connotation of remediation. Students, self-referred or referred by composition instructors, received help with composition basics, fundamental concepts, course-specific writing problems, and organization of ideas. A special attempt was made to achieve relevance for foreign students and those from minority backgrounds. In addition, the workshop served a smaller group of creative writers in search of a source of feedback. Tutors provided immediate, specific commentary in the presence of the student, diagnosed problems, and organized the individualized instruction process.

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The Writing Workshop: Philosophy, Form, and Function
in An Elective Composition Program

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The Writing Workshop: Philosophy, Form, and Function
in an Elective Composition Program

In his report ~~of his survey~~ on the status of Freshman English, Ron Smith¹ tells us that only 45 percent of the 491 schools responding to his questionnaire required a year of Freshman English in 1973. Smith's ~~report~~ ^{survey} suggests that the trend to reduce or eliminate the composition requirement is a strong and growing one. Five years ago our College of Arts and Sciences eliminated the requirement for Freshman Composition. At that time, the Writing Workshop became a resource for any students who wished help with their writing. Because of the present interest in both individualized instruction and elective composition programs, I would like to share with you some of the experiences we in the Writing Workshop have had as a tutorial facility functioning as an integral part of such an elective program. In order to do this, I will first describe briefly some of the thinking that preceded the decision to drop the requirement and ~~that~~ resulted in the development of the new program; ~~and~~ then I will tell how the Workshop relates to the Composition Program, the English Department, and the University Community. I will attempt to describe for you how, through the Workshop, we provide a place where students may come for interested professional counseling on any writing problem or project, deciding on the basis of their own perception of their needs, and their available time, how often they will attend.

When a college drops the composition requirement, it does so not because of a faculty conviction that student writing has reached such excellence that guidance is no longer necessary. Rather, the action stems

from a recognition that the traditional requirement has not worked. Necessarily, such a decision leaves a school with many problems to resolve: What will happen to the Composition Program? Can students be relied upon to take the writing courses they need? What is to be done about the incoming freshmen with little writing experience? Or ~~what~~ about the needs of a college community more heterogeneous than ever before? What ~~kind~~ of juniors and seniors, even graduate students, who need and seek further advice about their writing? What can be done to cope with such a range of writing problems? And finally, in the face of the generally poor quality of student writing, how can dropping the requirement be defensible?

In attempting to answer all of these questions, our department saw the main issue, the need for the improvement of writing, as one that went beyond the parameters of a single department. It was felt that to teach a composition course "in a kind of academic vacuum"² was even worse than not to teach it at all. In an article that underscores this point, Robert Russell ~~says~~^{says} that when the responsibility for good writing is vested in one department, the remainder of the faculty prefers to complain to that department about the poor quality of student writing rather than to become involved with the problem.³ The attitude is that after a student has passed the required writing courses, what can be done by a history or economics professor? Yet we do know that writing skills are generally not easily or quickly acquired, and that like other skills they need constant practice to be maintained. But practice of inappropriate forms and structures may lead to a stunting of skills development, even to a deterioration of what has been acquired.⁴ By ignoring the poor writing in a paper and ~~by~~ fixing upon the content alone, the professor may, ~~by~~^{through} a high grade, unwittingly reinforce poor expression. For to the student, the ~~grade~~^{rating} he receives relates to both the content and the way he has communicated his understanding of it. Yet, the

obverse is true. Frequently, poorly written material fails to suggest the writer's grasp of the ^{Content} ~~material~~. Therefore, such a student, locked into his own inability to express what he knows, often falls short of demonstrating the breadth of his knowledge and understanding and may become discouraged by what he perceives as an unjust grade. When poor writing is not pointed out to the student as a contributing factor to his low grade, the student is done a disservice. The point, then, was not that faculty at large mark papers as though they were composition teachers, but that they ought to bring poorly written papers to the attention of the students. Under such universal pressures, the student would have to seek improvement. The English Department believed that along with the assumption of the university-wide responsibility for clear and effective expression, they could work out some means of aiding students in need of help. This was and is the major defense for dropping the requirement.

When, in December 1970, the English Department went before the Faculty Senate to request that the composition requirement be dropped, the Senate asked for an alternate plan. That plan, which was accepted, attempted to confront the full complexity of the problem with vigor and resourcefulness. The Composition Program would be restructured, relating its purpose and function to the University as a whole. Composition courses would be open to all undergraduates, not just to freshmen. Training seminars for the teaching of composition would be established for graduate students and for part-time teachers in the Composition Program. Ties with the academic advising services would be strengthened so that students would be more aware of the resources available to them. In line with this objective, freshmen could sign up for a diagnostic writing test. A sample of their writing would be collected and evaluated in time for registration so that students could get on-the-spot advice about suitable classes and resources. In addition, a remedial writing center, available to all students, would be established. It would be a ready resource for

faculty referral of students whose writing was below acceptable standard. In September 1971, the Composition Program was an elective program, and the Writing Workshop was officially established.

It was our aim to design the Workshop as a place with an open, friendly atmosphere but affording the privacy of the tutorial. Avoiding any rigid format, we preferred to tailor each session to fit the individual student. Each tutor would informally discuss issues relevant to the student's writing and work out a suitable plan. Unlike many similar tutorial facilities, the Workshop was not a mandatory part of any course, offered no credit, and charged no fee.

We started with a staff of two tutors and a coordinator, all part-time. Because our staff was so small, we planned to be open for nine hours a week. But we had not taken into account that we were an urban university with many commuter students and part-time evening students. We soon found that during our scheduled hours many of the students who needed us were in class, ~~or were~~ ^{at} off campus or ~~were~~ working. Therefore we began to schedule students outside our regular hours. In our eagerness to provide a responsive service, we saw students any time between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m., frequently splitting our days to accommodate requests. Yet, at the end of the first year, we were tutoring only from 50 to 85 students a term. This was hardly the sort of service we had envisioned providing for our College of ten thousand students, although it kept us busy enough.

We decided that we must be available for students on a drop-in basis as well as by appointment. This meant expanding our staff so that we could serve every category of student: full or part-time, day or evening, commuter or resident. Through the support of our department head and of our program director, we gradually added to our staff so that by our third year we could

be open forty-five hours a week, thus providing ^{the needed} hours ~~for those who need them~~ and the kind of availability ~~that is~~ meaningful for those we serve.

Along with extended hours, we stepped up our efforts to reach both students and faculty. We began to send flyers regularly to faculty and advisers, to insert notices in the student press, and to tack signs on bulletin boards all over the campus. In short, we began a university-wide campaign to tell everyone about ourselves. We soon found that we would have to renew our efforts periodically. For example, incoming students would have to be told about us each term. We also had to take into account that students and faculty caught up in the everyday pressures and stresses might forget about us. We had to find ways of reminding them, and at the proper moments. We learned to send our notices so that they coincided as closely as possible with the first written assignments and two weeks before a probable midterm paper or final paper would be due.

From the beginning, one of our major interests was how we would function within the Composition Program. Therefore, one of our first efforts was to set up close lines of communication between its instructors and ourselves. Because most of the tutors had been drawn from the part-time staff of the Composition Program, they could support the classroom teachers in many positive ways by working with idiosyncratic writing problems that would not be handled in the classroom. We decided to send referral sheets for each instructor's use. Space was provided for the student's name, the date, and the reasons for the referral. By the following term, we were sending back regular "Work in Progress" reports, a practice we still follow. We make no judgements about the student's work, merely indicating on the form whether or not the student has honored the referral, and if he or she has, we note the number of visits made and the material covered. In this way instructors can check on our effectiveness

and can see whether the student has improved in the indicated areas. Our function when we began this close cooperative relationship was truly remedial in the sense that the composition instructor diagnosed and prescribed, and we filled the prescription by administering the appropriate remedy.

Moreover, at that time, our description of ourselves as a remedial center reflected how we saw ourselves as well as how others saw us. Yet we had visible and disturbing signs that the idea of remediation was anathema to college students. The term itself was threatening to them. When an instructor would suggest to a student that he or she go to the remedial center, the response was often pained or hostile. Although more students were coming in of their own volition, too many referred students were just not showing up. Yet, once such students hurdled the idea of being "remedial," they not only began to work with us but they usually enjoyed it. Of course some of the negative attitude was beyond our control, depending in some measure on how the instructor had made the referral. But much of it came from a general attitude that anyone in need of remedial help did not belong in college. When students feel that they are being stigmatized by being sent for supplemental help, help that is there for the asking, something is wrong.

We were also beginning to notice that we were not providing remediation for everyone. For some students, it was initiation to the process of writing rather than remediation; for other students--good writers--it was a desire to refine and to develop their writing skills. Some of these competent writers were interested in careers in writing. "Remediation" could hardly be applicable here. Aside from these two groups, many of our tutees were already at least average writers. Should we deny them help? Was our aim for mediocrity or excellence? The analogy is often drawn between writers and musicians. What master musician can ever stop trying for perfection? What fine writer is ever really content with his last opus?

But there were other issues as well as the issues of the negative connotation of "remediation," of the widespread need for guided practice, and of the desire of able writers for further improvement. Remediation with its implication of incorrectness was much too limited for our Black and minority students, our creative writers, our graduate students, all of whom were attending in ever-increasing numbers.

Another factor impelling us in the direction of a developmental philosophy, rather than a remedial one, was our fear that without the proper writing practice to synthesize newly acquired principles and techniques, the gains would be only transient. The remedial help we were giving students in the composition courses was, through weekly writing practice, transferred into the students' writing. The continued guidance of the classroom instructor acted to reinforce and tighten shaky beginnings. But what of the student who was writing only a single course specific paper that term? Obviously we would have to go beyond exercises and "explore together the process of writing."⁵ In working together on material for a real, not a practice, situation, the student would be receiving guidance under circumstances in which he would be highly motivated to succeed. We would, therefore, be providing the most effective kind of learning situation. This did not mean that we would not be involved with such fundamentals as sentence structure or punctuation, but when the student was not specifically referred for these, we would first concentrate on larger, ^{principles of writing} ~~issues, issues~~ related to the development of ideas: the limitation and organization of the thesis, the supports, the flow, the links in the writing. The punctuation and the other factors would then be considered for their ability to enhance and clarify, not as mere conventions.⁶

At this point, we were, in effect, dividing our students into two groups: the remedial--those who were referred for prescriptive measures--and the developmental. Later, we were to consider the remedial as subsumed under the developmental for practically all of our students. We have now worked out the following procedure for those students who are referred for remedial work. We ask the student to bring in a writing sample. We then discuss with him the effect of his punctuation or sentence structure on the shape of his ideas. We suggest materials for practice, but we work with that paper or another to transfer the principles into his writing. Everything we do has this developmental edge now. The student has a sense of growth as he sees his material change and develop. As teachers of writing we all know that a student's ability to work out exercises correctly indicates either that he will do a better job on revision or that he is ready to move to the higher level, that of creation, which is the more difficult and complex step.⁷ Exercises and drills are only partial answers, and writing a good sentence or knowing how to punctuate is only a fragment of the story. As Northrop Frye says, "Good writing is no simple process to be perfected by a neat formula."⁸ What is most important is that an increased motivation and involvement ^{takes place} when the student's mind is engaged in the development of his own problem. That is why everything that is practiced must be synthesized by the student into his written material as soon as possible.

Although our approach must be reckoned as an important factor in our growth, to be truly objective, I must say that many other variables must be considered when we examine the beginning surge of students toward us. We were becoming known throughout the University as a result of our publicity campaign, the widening support of the faculty, and the achievements of our tutees. We were beginning to get increased evidence of our effectiveness. Students who would have failed were going on to earn degrees. Several graduate

students who had failed their comprehensive exams now passed them, attributing much of their success to an improved ability to organize and express their ideas in writing. Best of all, students were referring students! But I do believe that our more positive approach opened the door. "Developmental" carries with it a sense of progression and optimism that the term "remedial" with its negative and static implication lacks.

There were other ends to be tucked in. Some students who had registered for composition courses occasionally resisted referrals because they had signed up for a course not a Workshop. After some discussion about the problem of mandating anything in an elective program, Bill Coles, our director, and I agreed that the sticking point was in the students' expectations. Therefore, the catalogue description of the Workshop was rewritten. It now contains the following: "Those students who are registered in the Composition Program, . . . may expect on occasion to be referred specifically to the Workshop, if in the opinion of their instructors special attention to a writing talent or to a writing difficulty seems called for." Students, prepared for the eventuality, ^{no}generally accept the referrals in a better spirit. If the students are told in advance what to expect, it appears to minimize later difficulties. Any residual apprehension disappears when they enter the informal yet busy atmosphere of the Workshop.

We took other steps to demonstrate our broadened interests. We instituted a series of poetry sessions under the auspices of the Workshop. These were fairly well attended by student poets glad of the chance to read their poems to a small sympathetic audience of fellow poets and to meet others with similar interests. We also, the following term, instituted a series on techniques of writing answers to essay tests. These group sessions, besides advertising the Workshop, advertised it in new ways that further aided in an altered perception of the Workshop by instructors and students.

Although by 1974 we had doubled our tutees, Black students as a group were still holding back. In the Winter Term of 1974, we made a special effort to reach them. We were granted a Chancellor's Scholarship to help us to implement our plan. A bright Black student in her senior year became our liaison with the Black Studies and with the University Community Education Program (UCEP), a special program designed to increase the enrollment of Black and other minority students in the University. Students in this program come mainly from inner city families who fall within national poverty guideline categories. UCEP attempts to bring this group of students, many of them underprepared in the skills necessary for academic success, up to an acceptable level of competence. Our liaison student told both Black students and instructors about us and asked them for suggestions. She emphasized our interest in helping those who needed and wanted such assistance. One year later, when we were again given a similar award, we also trained the student to tutor so that those she had spoken to would get help from someone familiar to them.

Any day in the Workshop reveals that now there is a widespread acceptance of our services among minority students. We value their trust. Mutual trust is a vital factor in a tutorial relationship. Another is a deep concern on the part of the tutors for the students, a concern coupled with a professional interest. This approach accepts the student where he is, reflects his adequacies, and helps each individual discover not only what he knows and what he is capable of knowing, but also how to express his discoveries in clear writing. That such a philosophy of acceptance and encouragement is correct may be seen by the large number of students who characterize themselves as "self-referred"--more than half. These students come to us without prior referral or professional suggestion.

Obviously any attempt to categorize our tutees will result in overlapping. It is with this understanding that I ~~would like to~~ indicate the five major groups of students we serve and their differing needs.

First, I would like to consider those students taking courses in the English Department. These may be sectioned into two groups: students in composition or writing and students in literature. The first group has already been discussed in some detail. But I would like to note briefly that although many are referred ^{by instructors} for specific help, some are also self-referred. Some who are first referred for specific problems continue to use our services long after the initial difficulty is resolved. In addition to help with the "basics" we may, therefore, be asked to clarify an assignment or to help in pre-writing. Through discussion we help the student to develop his own ideas. Or we may be asked to explain the instructor's notations on a paper a student needs to revise. During the session, we may even model certain solutions for a student such as how to combine several short sentences or how to determine the effect on an idea when the structure of a sentence is changed from coordinate to subordinate.⁹ The line here is delicate, for we do not want to be writing a theme for anyone, but a sample modeling is often very effective and too limited in scope to carry such a charge. The literature students have different needs. Some must be helped to read more sensitively, to become more aware of nuances and subtleties before they can write their themes. We usually help them write journals and reviews or critiques. They ~~can~~ also learn to paraphrase, summarize, and to use quoted material properly.

Second, there is a relatively small group of tutees, some regularly matriculated freshmen, some part-time students in the School of General Studies, who have had so little experience in handling the written forms that they feel too inadequate to cope with a classroom situation. The Workshop provides them

with the fundamental terminology they feel they need. Many of these students are encouraged to do free writing for at least ten minutes a day. We sometimes use programed texts with these students, but each step is supported with brief writing exercises, and any problems with the material are carefully clarified by the tutor before the student proceeds. Many Black students find this kind of learning situation useful and productive. Where oral dialect forms are used for academic written material, we give the student drills to enable him to recognize standard equivalents of the community dialect. The student then revises his own papers, applying the equivalent form. We emphasize the writer's need to think of the reader's ability to understand, and we relate the necessity of ~~the necessity of~~ mastering standard forms ~~for academic or professional use~~ to the ~~academic or professional~~ importance of reaching that reader.

Our third group is our largest group, encompassing students from every corner of the University. Chiefly, we give them course-specific help with research or term papers or other written assignments. This help is practical and apparently effective. The student has a problem-solving situation he must cope with. In such a meaningful situation, the direct application of new techniques is rewarded by a higher grade, thereby reinforcing what has been learned and aiding in its transfer. Even in this situation, tutors have to be ready for a variety of problems. Some students have such difficulty getting started they come in with the assignment, hoping that we can help them to decide on an idea. We sometimes have to help them analyze the key terms for a better understanding of what the assignment means. On the other hand, a student may have collected a mass of material which baffles him. The tutor helps the student limit his theme to a workable idea and find ways of organizing and developing his material in appropriate ways. Or the tutor may start with a rough draft, pointing out inconsistencies of logic, gaps in thinking, places where details or transitions would add to the clarity of the work, paragraphs that

are split and so on. But the tutor also finds areas to praise (every paper has something), places where a word is effectively chosen or an idea well phrased. A close, cooperative support continues up to but not including the final draft, which must be done by the student ^{alone} ~~along~~. While working on these assigned papers, tutors also note particular problems, bringing them to the students' attention. Many students then return for further work on these areas. In this large miscellaneous group, students may need help with such diverse assignments as diaries, journals, term papers, summaries, and critiques. In addition, graduate students from various disciplines frequently ask tutors to act as "naive" readers of a draft of a thesis or dissertation. Here the tutor generally points out the overuse of technical terms or suggests a more effective strategy of organization.

The fourth group is really a subgroup drawn from groups one and three. It is comprised of foreign students. Although these students are usually advised to take a course in the Linguistics Department specially fashioned for them, they ^{must} ~~may~~ have a way of continuing to get help and practice in writing. Many register in a composition course and use the Workshop as a supplement. They work with the tutors on such problems as the use of the article or the idiomatic use of prepositions, or any other difficulties they encounter with English as a second language. The main problem (as one would expect) is expressing with precision what ^{the individual} ~~he~~ wants to say. The tangling of syntax and problems with the idiom, often result in misapprehension of thought, and the tutor must be extremely sensitive to whether or not he is helping the student to say what he means. Another serious problem here, especially with students from Eastern countries, is the difference in the structure of thought patterns. Therefore, we often have to give them some basic understanding of logical reasoning in the development of a paragraph and of a paper.

The final group is composed of creative writers in search of a listening post. Tutors listen, but, unlike the post, make helpful suggestions. The response of a trained and experienced person helps these young artists to test the truth of their images, so that the writer gets some insight as to why an idea may be too elliptically expressed or a mood imperfectly sustained or a descriptive passage blurred.

Although the complexity of materials and approach must be matched to the level and skill of the student, in practice the basic technologies are the same regardless of whether the students are more or less academically sophisticated. The emphasis, however, differs with each group, indeed with each individual. In addition, each tutee must get a full measure of time. I have read of programs where twenty minutes is judged adequate. We find that our usual sessions run to a full hour. Some are shorter than an hour, but it is unusual to spend less than half an hour with a student. A skillful tutor can get a student started on material or a revision and then begin to work with someone else, returning periodically to each student. Such tutors can work with three or four students in this way. But there are frequently difficult cases where for emotional reasons, the nature of the assignment, or the level of the student's competence, the tutor must give the student his undivided attention. Each tutor must make her or his own judgement about the nature and length of each tutorial session, for the tutor shapes the session to fit the individual's needs. That is why a good staff of tutors is essential. The situation is, after all, quite different from that of the classroom. Tutors do not grade papers, nor do they write comments on them. They must be able to read a draft and then quickly decide in the presence of the student where the dialogue will have the best effect--not only on the paper but on the student's insight as well. The ability to make this kind of decision is developed only through experience and training.

Although individual tutoring styles differ, there must be some givens in a tutorial situation. All of our tutors try to observe the following:

1. The writing ~~problem~~ must be carefully diagnosed before proceeding.
2. A plan of action should be formulated.
3. The purpose or objectives of the plan should be made clear to the student.
4. The plan must be individualized so that the person's background and training are taken into consideration.
5. The plan must be sensitive to the student's feelings.
6. The plan must be encouraging with built-in successes.

Once the work is started, tutors keep in mind that:

1. Materials should be varied and suited to the student's needs. The sessions should move from principles to practice to expression.
2. The student should be assisted to make discoveries by skillful questioning that helps him to understand the "process" of writing.
3. All efforts should culminate in writing practice.
4. Student and tutor together should evaluate progress.

Our progress toward our main goal, the involvement of faculty, shows slow but steady progress. Each term more professors are moving into the kind of action we had hoped for when we asked that the requirement be dropped. Along with this achievement, the Composition Program is healthier than ever. The Workshop has been a useful supplement to it. Further, by giving students the kind of help they need when they need it, the Workshop encourages students to work harder on developing their writing skills. Many have been encouraged by their successes in the Workshop to take writing courses, and many have been helped to develop their academic competence.

Last year, 1975, our Workshop staff served 1071 students.

What's really basic about individualized instruction? For a Workshop like ours, the basics are first of all a positive and optimistic philosophy,

a competent and professional trained staff, faculty support, and an accessible facility. Although a library of materials at all levels of sophistication is also important, it is the human interaction which is the vital factor for success.

References

¹Ron Smith, "The Fall 1973 Survey of the Composition Requirement: A Summary of Results," College English 36 (Jan. 1975), 589.

²William Coles, "Address to Board of Trustees," University of Pittsburgh, June 1974.

³Robert Russell, "The Question of Composition: A Record of a Struggle," College English 30 (Nov. 1968), 171-177. This article was influential in the department's decision to drop the requirement.

⁴Edward A. Townsend and Paul J. Burke, Learning for Teachers (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1962), p. 101. Educational Psychology texts abound in discussions about the importance of guided practice, but the remark of these authors bears repeating: "One need only examine his own handwriting to discover an instance where practice makes imperfect."

⁵Jean Pumphrey, "Teaching English Composition as a Creative Art," College English 34 (Feb. 1973), p. 666. Pumphrey emphasizes personal interaction between teacher and student as a necessary concomitant in the development of interest in the process of writing. We have observed that the close cooperation of tutor and tutee in the Workshop often effects a real excitement as the student begins to value his ideas to the point where he wants to share them and sees language as the medium that will give them shape.

⁶This approach is, of course, not unique with us. I have not found it used in the same setting, however. For example, it forms the philosophical underpinnings of the Queens College (CUNY) Writing Skills Workshop which I visited in April 1975. Here the Workshop is a mandated part of the freshman composition requirement. Sandra Schor and Judy Fishman have an impressive program, mainly with a corps of peer tutors, trained and supervised by faculty.

⁷Benjamin Bloom, et al., Taxonomy of Behavioral Objectives, Handbook I, (New York: David McKay Co., 1967), pp. 7-8.

⁸Northrop Frye, ed., Design for Learning, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), p. 38.

⁹Francis L. Fennell, "Writing as Art," College Composition and Communication, 26 (May 1975), p. 177. Fennell favors modeling as one important method in the teaching of writing. We have found it one of our most useful techniques, but we feel justified in using it only when the student can immediately emulate in another part of his paper what we have done.

¹⁰Adapted in part from Leo J. Bruekner and Guy L. Bond, The Diagnosis and Treatment of Learning Difficulties (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, Inc., 1955), pp. 77-78.